



Beyond Decoding: Art Installations and Mediation of Audiences

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ABSTRACT

This article uses case studies of visual art installations to elaborate an alternative view of the way art is experienced by museum and gallery visitors. In particular, it is argued that the orthodox and influential decoding perspective in the sociology of art overlooks the situated and experiential nature of art, especially when art takes the form of installations. In order to study experiences of art installations, this article draws on recent developments in cultural sociology and the sociology of music to reintroduce the idea of mediation into thinking about and with art. A focus on processes of mediation allows me to address the communications and interactions which emerged at the particular art installation under consideration here, a piece called PharmaConcert by Evgeniy Chertoplyasov that was displayed at the Winzavod Art Centre in Moscow in 2011. Detailed analysis of the forms of interactions at this exhibition shows that as audience members perceive artworks, they transform abstract expectations of artworks into a series of specific and situated actions. Simultaneously, other mediation processes reassemble the audiences through shared experience of contested meanings of an artwork. The paper challenges the orthodox sociological notion of what an 'audience' is and instead sees audiences as an emerging form of communication and interaction specific to a particular artwork / installation.

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INTRODUCTION

As a specific genre of contemporary art, installation art has gained widespread popularity among artists in recent years, subsequently leading some art critics to claim that installations have become “everybody’s favorite medium” (Smith, 1993). Yet, since its emergence in the late 1960s, neither critics nor practitioners can come to any agreement with regards to the particularities of what an art installation ‘is’ (Bishop, 2005; De Oliveira, *et al.*, 2003). Broadly conceived and loosely defined, an installation refers to artworks “into which the viewer physically enters, and which [are] often described as ‘theatrical’, ‘immersive’ or ‘experiential’” (Bishop, 2005, p. 6). An “experiential” ontology of this genre indicates that the spectator becomes an essential element of the piece, with the event of experiencing or perceiving the piece constituting an integral part of its being. While non-installation forms of art (a painting, a sculpture, etc.) presume an individualised and often distanced experience by a spectator, grounded in relatively simple subject-object relations, art installations allow spectators to experience “the totality of exhibition space” (Groys, 2011) and “build a community of spectators precisely because of the holistic, unifying character of the space produced by the installation” (Groys, 2011). Its ability to produce social relations makes the genre of installation art particularly sociologically significant.

Despite this, art installations have often escaped sociological interest. A few examples do exist, including the studies of Acord (2006; 2010) and Yaneva (2003a; 2003b), which explore the processes of installing artworks (including art installations art and other visual art genres) and the various instances of practical work performed by different participants (curators, artists, workers, etc.). Focusing primarily on the production side, these studies pay particular – and reasonable – attention to the mediating role of artistic objects in the actual and situated context of meaning construction with regards to installing and exhibiting artworks. Yet I argue here that another side of the mediations of art installations should also be taken into sociological account. As I will argue in this paper, *it is perception of an art installation which mediates the production of an audience*.¹ Having considered perception as a decoding process (Bourdieu, 1968), sociology often overlooks its practical and situated nature. As a result, audiences of contemporary art installations are constructed as a sum of individuals who possess similar biographical backgrounds, and are possessed of homogeneous forms of capital (especially high levels of cultural capital). In what follows I will argue for a significantly different view of the audiences of art (here, art installations). By focusing on the situated perception and emergent orders of interaction, I will show that audiences are, instead, forms of communication which take place as a result of participation and interaction with an art installation. These forms, which are shared and recognized by spectators, serve as foundation for a “community of practice”. A detailed empirical focus on the perception practices of spectators of art installations will provide evidential grounds for the construction of an idea of what an audience is, beyond the orthodox decoding metaphors so dominant within much art sociology since the 1960s.

I address the problem of perception both theoretically and empirically by conducting a series of ethnographic video-based observations at the installation called *PharmaConcert* by Evgeniy Chertoplyasov, which was displayed at the Winzavod

¹There are several examples of the study of art perception carried out by ethnomethodologists (Heath and vom Lehn, 2004; Heath and vom Lehn, 2008), design researchers (Khut, 2006; Morrison, *et al.*, 2007), psychologists (Jacucci, *et al.*, 2009; Winkler, 2000), and interdisciplinary scholars (Tschacher, *et al.*, 2012). Some sociological reflection on the problem of perception can be found in (Prior, 2005).

Centre for Contemporary Art in Moscow in 2011.² Through the analysis of this particular case, I analyze the mediating process in art perception and the impact of interaction and communication on the audience-making process. The analysis shows that perception mediates audiences in opposing ways. During acts of audience perception and engagement with the installation, visitors transform abstract expectations that they have about artworks into a series of specific and situated actions. The dynamics of experience show that a shared reality of contested meanings of an artwork emerges in this process, which brings specific forms of artistic communication into being. I describe these processes as mediation of audiences. This study shows forms of artistic communication to be fragile and contingent, demonstrating how important is to look at the situated and practical work of the spectators and other actors when evaluating the sociological significance of art installations. This point starts to take us beyond the orthodox decoding model into what I believe are productive ways for future sociological studies to take account of art perception-in-the-making.

PERCEPTION AND SOCIOLOGY: FROM DECODING TO MEDIATION

The historical preoccupation of sociology with “traditional” forms of art, along with the significant difficulties of critical social science to deal with aesthetic issues (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 139-148; Latour 2005, p. 236), resulted in an exclusion of artworks from the disciplines’ core conceptualizations. Artworks matter insofar as they are part of the art worlds, but not as aesthetic or material objects in their own rights. In the classical works of Harrison and Cynthia White (1993), Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1996), and Diana Crane (1989), the structural and relational elements of art worlds are described as significantly more important than the work of arts themselves. Creation and perception of artworks are considered here as mere manifestations of the social relations which constitute the art worlds and society in general. More specifically, these studies take perception to mean a decoding operation, and the beholder’s capacities to decode are seen as dependent on the individual’s cultural capital. This approach easily fits the predominant production of culture approach, which demonstrates empirically the way art and society are interrelated (Peterson, 1976).

During the last 10-15 years, however, there has been an increasing presence of theoretical debates in the cultural sociology of the arts. The focus of these debates includes the problems of reductionism (Hennion and Grenier, 2000), of meaning (Eyerman and Ring, 1998; Eyerman, 2006), and of artworks (de La Fuente, 2010a). More recent debates focus on the emotional and material properties of culture (Strandvad, 2012). Jeffrey Alexander’s school of cultural sociology introduces the notion of iconicity in order to understand material life in a more culturally sensitive way (Alexander, 2010). Other important studies of the arts follow recent developments in anthropology and actor-network theory. Tia DeNora, Antoine Hennion, Georgina Born, and others apply the ideas of agency (DeNora, 2006), performance (Hennion, 2007b; 2009), and object-interactions to reconsider traditional problems of cultural production (Born, 2009) and taste (Hennion, 2001). A different meta-critical approach reintroduces the notion of reflexivity into sociology of art in order to deal with issues of post-Bourdieuian sociology (Inglis, 2010). These approaches share a critical stance towards the reductionist approach of a critical sociology of culture. While Alexander’s school emphasizes the importance of symbolic meanings which should not be reduced to social structure, actor-

² This paper is the result of the research conducted during my PhD studies at the University of Aberdeen.

network theorists and anthropologists “discover” the significance of material aspects of art. This article shares the critical stance since it also leads us to question the limitations of the decoding approach towards art perception.

Bourdieu's (1968) decoding approach is part of the cultural consumption domain in the sociology of art, and relates to the production domain through a set or a network of intermediaries which deliver cultural products to audiences leading the domains of production, distribution, and consumption to form what Griswold (1994) and others (cf: Alexander, 2003) describe as a model of a cultural diamond. The cultural diamond model assumes that an artwork contains a message which has to be distributed by “some person, organization, or network” (Alexander, 2003, p. 61). In the act of perception a spectator aims to decode this message. As Pierre Bourdieu put it in 1968, artistic perception is only possible if one semiotic system (that of an artwork) matches with the other one (that of a beholder).³ The more complicated and elaborated system a beholder has, the more opportunities he/she has to unpack an artwork and make decoding “possible and effective” (Bourdieu, 1968, p. 589). Bourdieu insists that people who have mastered a code do not recognize the social conditions that make their perception possible; decoding is a natural and innate skill. This is what he later describes as an *illusio*: “an illusion of reality collectively shared and approved” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 334). Introduction of the notion *illusion* makes sociological contributions to semiotics as far as an illusion is always a result of social distinction and inequality. Following this conceptual framework, Bourdieu empirically studies two forms of perception: *enjoyment* and *delight* (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, *et al.*, 1991). These forms differ by the volume of cultural capital needed for each to be performed. The more cultural capital a person has, the more delighted by an artwork they will be. The continuum between enjoyment and delight is organized according to the levels of iconological analysis, as provided by Erwin Panofsky (Bourdieu, 1968). While the most complicated analysis (iconological) is referred to as yielding delight, at the lowest degree of comprehension a beholder understands “the primary or natural subject matter or meaning which we can apprehend from practical experience” (Bourdieu, 1968, p. 592).

Bourdieu himself has recognized some crucial problems with this approach, and in his later writings he revisits the idea of perception (Bourdieu, 1996). He admits that “aesthetic sense is a particular case [of practical sense]” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 315) and proposes to see perception as a practice and not as a reflexive activity. In doing so, one needs not overestimate the role of “philologism” and therefore needs not treat perception as an intellectual reading in a strictly scholarly sense (Bourdieu, 1996).⁴ Obviously, this revision leads to the rejection of the decoding idea to a certain extent. Later writings from Bourdieu illustrates that “the contemporary native, in contrast to the interpreter, invests in his comprehension practical schemas which never crop up as such in consciousness” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 314). Therefore since these practical schemas manifest social position, an artwork is primarily seen by Bourdieu as a product of the existing social distinctions and thus its aesthetic and formal (material and conceptual) nature is not taken into consideration. Hence, to

³ According to cultural scholar Stuart Hall, this identifies “the operation within the hegemony of the dominant code” (Hall, 1980). Apparently an ideal beholder of a particular artwork is an artist herself. This artist is a source of artistic competence and, supposedly, always knows what the artwork means so that there should be no problems to decipher it correctly (Bourdieu, 1968).

⁴ As Bourdieu often notes, reading always seems to be a natural way to approach art works. To follow Bourdieu, one could argue that interpretation of art, being dominated primarily by high class people, requires relevant approaches, and in so far as high class people are those who are able to “read” and decode, art appears to be readable (Bourdieu, 1987). An alternative view considers reading as a skill which has its own procedures and whose practice often involves learning and doing a particular invisible work (cf: Livingston, 2006; O'Hanlon, 1995).

perceive an artwork means to participate in the illusion which hides its social grounds, and perception differs according to the beholder's biography. The artwork escapes the sociological analysis, and the focus shifts towards the biographical trajectories of beholders.

The role of the artwork has become a cornerstone in recent debates (De La Fuente, 2010a; Gell, 1998) which have subsequently divided the disciplinary field into sociologists of art and art-sociologists (De La Fuente, 2007). While the former study art as a manifestation and product of social relations, the latter argue that art is an important device for organizing and constituting social order (Acord and DeNora, 2008). The active role of artworks in shaping social being is followed by the shift from meaning effects to the effects of presence (Gumbrecht, 2004). The transformation is consonant with the increasing presence of art installations in contemporary art. Thus a framework which will focus on the experience of art is needed.

The idea of mediation, as I will suggest, sheds light on the performative and creative role of artworks within the event of perception. It gives an opportunity to unpack the social effects which artwork has as an ordering device, *i.e.*, to organize interaction and to bring meanings into situated actions. The term mediation is not novel, and both sociologists and ethnomusicologists trace its use back to Theodor Adorno's sociology of music (Born, 2005; Miles, 1997). More recently, this idea has been introduced into the sociology of art (de la Fuente, 2010b) from studies of music due to the ontological nature of music.⁵

Music has nothing but mediations to show: instruments, musicians, scores, stages, records... The works are not 'already there', faced with differences in taste also 'already there', over-determined by the social. They always have to be played again. (Hennion, 2003, p. 83)

Music differs from other art forms because music as art is 'elusive' and it is only given to us in the form of performances and mediations.⁶ But what is a *mediation*? How does mediation differ from the more conventional term 'intermediary' that was elaborated by Bourdieu (1984) among others? How can it help other sociologists to deal with non-musical art, and why does it seem relevant for the study of perception of contemporary art installations?

A basic understanding of the term intermediary implies that the notion signifies an element which takes place between other elements (Latour, 2005).⁷ The sociology of art supposes that a cultural institution or a group of professionals could constitute a third element between cultural producers and consumers, for example. These elements make art available for general public. However, I wonder if art experience is possible without these intermediary groups, institutions or other devices. Can we imagine a situation of immediate art perception? Sociologically speaking, the answer is no. Therefore there is always a third element and it shapes our experience. These

⁵ In the sociology of science, as Latour (2005) puts it, objective facts were obstacles that were finally easily dismissed by social constructivism. These facts are nowadays (re)introduced back within the broad social science movement of actor-network theory. The same can be said about music. Music was easily reduced to the social factors behind it, and thus we have recently witnessed a revived interest in the music itself which goes beyond reductionism and "traditional" sociological explanation. This is a more common theoretical challenge which has loomed large in disciplinary debates for at least last 20 years.

⁶ Music "favours associations or assemblages between musicians and instruments, composers and scores, listeners and sound systems – that is, between subjects and objects" (Born, 2005, p. 7).

⁷ A common definition of cultural intermediary, for production of culture scholars, refers to the works of Pierre Bourdieu who defined an intermediary as those who are engaged in "all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 359). For a critical and analytical discussion of this term see, Negus (2002).

mediations are not neutral in relation to our perceptions since they are part and parcel of what we perceive in museums and art galleries. As put by Hennion, “mediations are neither mere carriers of the work, nor substitutes which dissolve its reality; they are the art itself” (Hennion, 2003, p. 84).⁸ Hence we experience mediations of art, and as long as there are many of them, the resulting art experience is also multiple and depend on the mediations.⁹ Visiting an art exhibition at the museum and browsing the websites with the same artworks are two radically opposed examples of how mediations both socially and materially may enact multiple experiences.

How does mediation change the sociological views of an audience? The most common view constructs audiences on the grounds of the social properties of individuals who interact with an artwork. Following the mediation turn in sociology of art, I will argue that an audience is not a group, rather it is a specific form of communication enabled by an artwork. As Acord and DeNora illustrate, “artistic forms have power over bodies insofar as they provide structures, patterns, parameters, or meanings to which bodies semiconsciously latch on – or more consciously try to work with to constitute themselves or particular states of being” (Acord and DeNora, 2008, p. 228). Thus art provokes, or affords, actions and states of social being (audiences). To see an *audience-as-communication* means that these states of being are shared and recognized by all the participants and observers. The processes of mediation understood as “the all-encompassing process of simultaneously producing, changing, and transforming both the artistic object and its audience at any given point in time” (Acord and DeNora, 2008, p. 226) become the key focus for the study of perception and art experience.

Just as music scholarship had done some time ago (DeNora, 2006), contemporary interactive art installations have begun to challenge the idea of decoding. This is why the framework of mediation is relevant to studies of situated and embodied forms of art perception. Following this, we accept several assumptions regarding art perception and mediation: (1) perception is a practice and should be sociologically treated as practice, (2) this practice results in the emergent social order, (3) the emergent social order is possible if the actions of participants are meaningfully recognized by others, and (4) mutual recognition mediates the forms of communication.

In what follows I will follow this mediation process in empirical detail in order to study audience interactions at the exhibition *PharmaConcert*. Before I turn to these empirical observations, I will first consider the methodological principles that guided this field study.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

While the decoding perspective has significantly contributed to the methodological development of the production of culture perspective, new cultural sociology of arts does not provide a universal and singular methodology for analysis (de la Fuente,

⁸ The shift from intermediaries to mediations signifies a more general trend in the social sciences today that is a shift from studying constructed realities towards studying the construction of those realities (Hennion, 2007a). Mediation is a not a neutral process; it constructs and renders visible that which has not been possible to recognize without mediation.

⁹ Here we follow a similar argument made by Annemarie Mol in *The Body Multiple*. “If practices are foregrounded there is no longer a single passive object in the middle, waiting to be seen from the point of view of seemingly endless series of perspectives. Instead, objects come into being – and disappear – with the practices in which they are manipulated” (Mol, 2002, p. 5).

2010b). We must, rather, speak of multiple approaches which share the same theoretical intentions that together allow researchers to grasp different forms of mediation and experience of art. As long as we follow our assumptions, the most relevant methodological framework is ethnographic observations framed within a qualitative research model. More specifically, we will look at the behavioral patterns and communications of the spectators which form the events of perception. By focusing on spectators' conduct we can identify how an audience is mutually constituted by the spectators and the specific form of communication that unfolds.

An attempt to provide a qualitative methodology for this new cultural sociology of arts is outlined by Sophia K. Acord (2006), who combines close observation accompanied by video recording of the actions and self-guided commentary on the video by the participants in follow-up interviews. She used these so-called "aesthetic methodologies" in order to study the meaning-making process as a part of curatorial work (Acord, 2010). While this approach can be successfully applied to the work of a curator, it causes some significant problems with regard to the study of art perception. First, the ethnographer should be situated very close to the participant's practice. While it is possible to negotiate the intervention with a few people, it is not possible to do this with a significant amount of visitors. Secondly, curators often reflect on their practice (although this is not recorded), while spectators often fail to recognize what they usually do in the art space. Thirdly, it is important to maintain the natural character of a setting, where the mediation takes place. Therefore, we must take the events of perception as such, excluding the researcher's intervention, as these "natural" events are the basic units of analysis.

An alternative approach is proposed in microethnographic studies carried out in museum and science centers by Christian Heath and others (for example, cf. Heath and vom Lehn, 2008). They provide us with a methodological design to study concrete instances of mediations. Like Acord, Heath uses video recording to follow museum visitors' practices, and proceeds from the assumption that practices (gestures, movements, small talk, etc.) produce the experience of art and via this enactments art objects become meaningful.¹⁰ Thus "[t]he perception and experience of the painting emerge, progressively, within the interaction" (Heath and vom Lehn, 2004, p. 52). This ethnomethodological analysis of specific events of perception reveals the nature of emergent order and the role of gestures, talk, and bodily movements that mediate the process and allow audience participants to share the same meanings and social order.

For the purposes of this study, I take an ethnographic approach, using a video recorder to record the ordinary sequences of action produced as a result of encounter with an art object. Particular attention is paid to the visitors' conversations with visitor guides (alternatively known as wardens, guards, or gallery assistants). The analysis presented here is focused on the detailed transcriptions of selected episodes from observations carried out on February 22, 2012. This case study is typical in the sense that it represents the ordinary and usual patterns and events of perception. Additionally, it demonstrates empirically the mediation process. Some additional information will be given from interviews with the artist and the visitor assistant. The analysis of the detailed transcripts is based partly on the modified notation system accepted and widely recognized among conversation analysts and ethnomethodologists (Heath, *et al.*, 2010).

¹⁰ See more detailed discussion of methods including ethical problems, problems of access and further analysis in (Heath, *et al.*, 2010).

Despite some slight ethnomethodological influences, the study does not fit completely the ethnomethodological research framework. Ethnomethodology has never been specifically interested in art related issues as such. Its main focus is “achieved phenomenon of order” (Garfinkel, 1996), and art is in the scope of ethnomethodological interests insofar as art experience and creative work are ordered sequences of actions; see, for example, David Sudnow's (1978) work in sociology of music. In this respect, recent developments in the sociology of art can definitely benefit from ethnomethodology, as this paper aims to demonstrate. Conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, and actor network theory have many commonalities and contradictions which space does not permit me to discuss here.¹¹ Generally speaking, since I am primarily guided by actor-network developments in sociology of art, I use ethnomethodological tools to the extent that they help me to answer my research questions and advance our understanding of perception as a situated activity.

My epistemological position of the observer was primarily shaped by my own experience in art participation. In practical terms it means that at the beginning of my fieldwork at the exhibition I explored the installation and acted as an ordinary visitor. Therefore it was important for further analysis to identify similar patterns of interaction which I observed and analyzed on the video records.

Video recording was permitted by the curator, the artist, and a representative of the Winzavod administration. I put a poster near the entrance to inform visitors about the ongoing research and could stop recording if somebody requested. (No stops were requested during my observations.) I followed ethical guidelines accepted in video-based research as part of ethnographic observations (Heath, *et al.*, 2010).

PHARMACONCERT ART SHOW: EXHIBITION SETTING DESCRIPTION



Figure 1. The poster of the PharmaConcert art show. Though it is said that exhibition was open only during February, 2011, it was extended for one week in March.

¹¹ See reflections by Latour on how actor-network theory can benefit from ethnomethodology (Latour 2005). For critical remarks on ANT from ethnomethodologists see Lynch (1996) and Preda (2001).

Observations at the *PharmaConcert* art show were a part of broader fieldwork activities performed in Moscow from January to July, 2011. I studied this particular art show during February. Each day, up to 100 visitors (4,234 in all) attended the show in the START art space at the Winzavod Art Centre.¹² START has been specifically created in order to support young artists from Russia and is free of charge. The *PharmaConcert* art show was designed by Evgeniy Chertoplyasov and had its second exhibition at Winzavod. The poster (Figure 1) shows the setting of the first exhibition in Samara, Russia. (Its Moscow setting was slightly different.) The artist classified his artwork as a “sound installation” (Interview with E. Chertoplyasov).



Figure 2. The overview of the PharmaConcert art show.

The show occupied a rectangular space (Figure 2), and was designed as if it was a scientific laboratory whereby the task of the artist and curator was to create feelings of experimental science (Interview with E. Chertoplyasov). The space was divided into two parts, which were located opposite one another. Along the left of the wall was a long table with a row of seven numbered flasks and seven glasses of water. The flasks were filled with pills, which were empty and contained no medicine. On the middle of the table, which was covered by a white cloth, was a sheet of A4 paper. The sheet contained instructions, which I will discuss later. On the opposite side, there were seven cabins, each with headphones secured with nails (Figure 3).

¹² Winzavod assembles a number of both commercial and non-commercial art institutions at one location, a former wine factory. In the welcoming message published at the official website, Sofia Trotsenko, a president of Winzavod, says that “The purpose of WINZAVOD is to support and to develop Russian contemporary art” (Trotsenko, 2012). The exhibition space START is supported by Winzavod, and it organizes exhibitions of young Russian artists on a regular basis. It aims to promote them in the contemporary art world and facilitate the discovery of new artists. START has its own curator, and at the time I did my observations Arseniy Zhilyaev curated the shows and *PharmaConcert* as well. I will use Winzavod to refer to this centre throughout this article.



Figure 3. There were seven cabins with headphones secured on the nails. Visitors were expected to listen to *PharmaCompositions* after taking a pill.

On the frontal wall was a huge black and white portrait of Zhivokost Okopnik, who was the main character of the art show, below which a showcase was installed. Inside the showcase several artifacts such as photos, chemicals, and other materials, were exhibited. The visitor assistant sat at the beginning of the table with flasks near the front wall. Two visitor texts – one written by the curator and the second by the artist – were posted near the entrance.

This laboratory was a sound-installation and thus implied an essential sound-component. *PharmaConcert* told a story about the fictional composer and scientist Zhivokost Okopnik who carried out chemical and musical experiments in Soviet times.¹³ As a result he produced a number of musical minimalistic compositions, so-called *Pharma*-compositions, which consisted of high-frequency sounds. It was supposed that listening to these compositions was possible only after taking a particular medicine – the pills which were put on the opposite side of the cabins with headphones. The artist's text narrated Okopnik's biography and paid particular attention to his scientific discoveries, putting them into a broad historical context. It also shed the light on the contemporary rediscovery of his laboratory in the city of Samara, Russia.

A second visitor text was given by the curator Arseniy Zhilyaev, who placed the artwork within a contemporary context and argued that the artwork was a contribution to understandings of Soviet utopia and Soviet ideas of science, such as its engineering and managerial accomplishments. The curator noticed that the sound-installation by Evgeniy Chertoplyasov was a rare example of “utopian radicalism”, an attempt to challenge the dominant understanding of art history and its subjects. This text described the fictional story produced by the artist as having nothing in common with the “real” facts from the history of art or science.

¹³ The name of Zhivokost Okopnik refers to Russian name of herb Comfrey. The artist told me that he was attracted by the association of two words which reminded him a name.

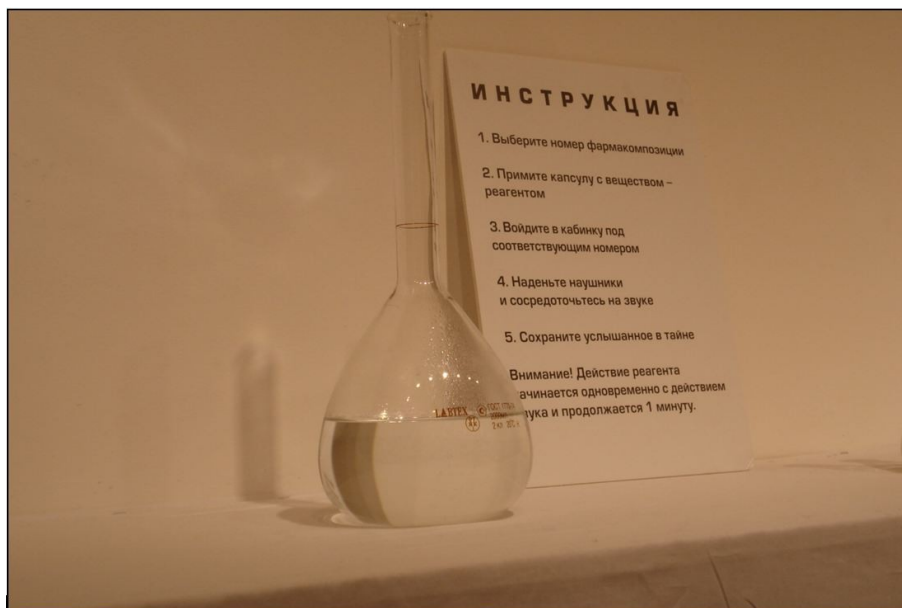


Figure 4. The instruction text informed the visitors what to do in order to engage with the art installation.

One more element of the exhibition setting, which is the most crucial for the understanding of perception, was the instruction text on the table (Figure 4). It contained a script, which was designed to be performed by a visitor in five steps. First, the visitor should choose a number of the *Pharma*-composition, a musical piece had been created by Okopnik. Then, second, they should take a pill with the same number. Then, third, they should enter the cabin with the chosen number to listen to the composition through headphones (the fourth step), which enable them to concentrate on the sounds. And, finally, the fifth step was to keep everything heard in secret.

“WHAT DO PEOPLE DO? NOTHING!” AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF PERCEPTION



Figure 5. Typical interaction at the PharmaConcert art show for illustrative purposes (from the records of March 3, 2011).

Being a curious researcher, and being able to watch this intended episode several times, I started my analysis by examining individuals' physical engagement with the exhibition setting. This engagement, however, was followed by what I later qualified as great confusion. The visitors entered the gallery space and assumed that everything should have been clear. However the arrangement of seven flasks with pills breached their expectations. The invitation to take a pill which looked like a real medicine went far beyond the expected audience behavior in the art space. Additional work was needed by visitors and a visitor assistant to overcome this confusion and reassure visitors that participation would be safe.

The common practice of taking a pill was framed within a new, and highly meaningful, system which required a great degree of trust and predictability. Since participation might cause unexpected consequences, predictability is an important condition for perception practice, and thereby any lack of trust produced a space of risk at *PharmaConcert*. Evgeniy Chertoplyasov, in the interview, confirmed that this risk was an essential part of the experience. He did not intend the visitors to experience any harm. For him, risk was a way to interest people and to further attract and puzzle visitors. The artwork, therefore, produced an uncertainty of action amongst the visitors and challenged any meanings of existing social order. To restore order, and to be able to perform recognizable actions, a visitor must do the practical work. Hence it was precisely in the perception of this art piece, as I have already suggested, that order was mediated. Order was not a pre-given; it needed to be achieved in the course of the endless iterations of communication. So how did visitors achieve this order?

The usual way that visitors dealt with these doubts was to approach somebody who could provide grounds for the recognizable actions, who were usually exhibition visitor assistants.¹⁴ The role of the Visitor Assistant was especially crucial. She facilitated understandings and, on occasion, provided additional practical information. In effect, she was the only source of confidence for visitors, and, thus, events of perception usually went through a series of interactions and communications with her. Finally, after much clarification, visitors usually either approached the artwork and took a pill (success) or left the hall without participating.¹⁵

Let me describe in details how the visitors dealt with this situation and reduced their risk. Primarily, I will examine the methods the actors used to make this situation less unpredictable and to reinstate recognition of their role in the social order.

The episode starts when a male visitor (MV2)¹⁶ enters and investigates the setting.

1. // MV2 enters the hall and goes to the right-hand wall and looks briefly at the artist's explication. (2.0)
2. // Then he turns back to the left-hand wall and looks at the table while MV1 is

¹⁴ A woman of middle age acted as a visitor assistant during my observations. In what follows, I use capitalized words to refer to a particular person, such as Visitor Assistant.

¹⁵ This difference is very vague. Any form of participation (even not taking a pill) can be treated as success. The visitors' notion of success, as fieldwork shows, is identified by the complete performance of the script.

¹⁶ MV2 refers to a male visitor who appeared as second in the succession of visitors in the raw video file. The same system of coding applies to other visitors. For example, FV1 refers to a female visitor who appeared first in the raw video file.

passing him.
 3. // He goes to the centre of the hall and stands in front of the table and reads the instruction. (3.1)
 4. [/ / Turns back to the entrance, makes a gesture with his hand to attract attention of MV3 and goes towards his friends.
 5. [/ / The Visitor Assistant puts numbers in her observation list¹⁷
 6. // MV3 and FV1 go towards MV2

Excerpt 1.¹⁸

Excerpt 1 indicates that MV2 is the first individual from a group of his friends who enters the hall, and he then tries to attract their attention and invites them to share his surprise as we see in the following Excerpt 2.

7. **MV3:** What's this
 8. **MV2:** ()¹⁹
 9. **MV3:** () You're kidding?
 10. **MV2:** Yeah ()
 11. // MV2 turns towards the Visitor Assistant and makes few steps
 12. **MV2:** And how-how does it work?= // Asks the Visitor Assistant and comes closer to the place where she sits
 13. **FV1:** =And I will have one to try ()
 14. (1.0)
 15. **[THE VA:** °So how it works↑ I do not know↓°=
 16. [/ / FV1 laughs but then together with MV3 they are observing the conversation. MV3 is ready to make a picture
 17. **MV2:** =You don't know?
 18. **THE VA:** °(.)° Just have it, ↑take, *you will* feel=
 19. **[MV2:** =How long *do they work*?
 20. [/ / FV1 and MV3 moves towards the MV2
 21. [/ / MV2 comes closer to the desk with the review book
 22. (.)
 23. **THE VA:** As written in the instruction=
 24. =// FV1 and MV3 are reading the instruction. MV2 joins them
 25. **THE VA:** =During- one- minute-
 26. **MV3:** °Oh (.) yes°
 27. // MV2, FV1, MV3 gather and discuss something – unclear.

Excerpt 2.

In Excerpt 2, MV3 initially asks MV2 what the artwork is about and then, after reading the instruction text, he is surprised and confused (“You’re kidding?”, 9). MV2 approaches the only person who he expects may know something more (12). It is interesting here that the Visitor Assistant herself claims that she does not know how to answer the question “theoretically”: “°So how it works↑ I do not know↓°=”

¹⁷ This technique registered the number of visitors attended the exhibition.

¹⁸ The transcriptions are translated from Russian. Each line number in the excerpts refers to a relevant number in the full transcript. Double slashes indicate the transcription of visitors' behaviour. Left square brackets refer to simultaneous utterances or movements. Asterisk signs mark skipped words which I insert to facilitate understanding of communication.

¹⁹ Some of the utterances are not clear; these are displayed as parentheses enclosing spaces.

(15). Instead she suggests that MV2 take a pill and experience it in practice: “°(.)° Just have it, ↑take, *you will* feel=” (18). Thus the question about the meaning and the mechanism of the installation is transformed into the practical instructions about what to do. These verbal instructions are not formal and abstract, *i.e.*, they are not posted in the exhibition space. However, they are supplementary to those which are given in a form of a text on the table. The instruction on the table serves as a rule as far as the Visitor Assistant refers to them. “As written in the instruction” (23), she says in response to one of the questions (19). She also adds a citation of the text to give some strict recommendations: “During- one- minute” (25). The Visitor Assistant treats everything as if the installation is self-explanatory and as if the additional questions raised by the visitors have surprised her and caused her confusion (or even irritation).

This exchange is followed by a reiteration of the instruction in order to achieve clarification, as seen in Excerpt 3. However, this clarification is more than a simple repetition of the formal instructions because they may have been unclear. On the contrary, the instructions were written very clearly; they were simply not sufficient.

32. [(2.0)
33. [// MV2 makes few steps back and looking at the Visitor Assistant
34. **MV2:** And do people feel healthy after?=
35. =// FV1 laughs
36. // The Visitor Assistant nods.
37. **MV2:** Yeah?
38. // The Visitor Assistant nods.
39. (.)
40. **MV2:** And have you tried?
41. **THE VA:** // Shakes her head // ° no (.) I have only listened °=
42. MV2 together with MV3 go to the [showcase.
43. **FV1:** =[() and you need [just
opposite to each↑
44. [// FV1 moves her hand from right to left
45. [// MV3 stops and looks at FV1
46. **THE VA:** well take one (.) any of them (.) choose a cabin (.) only do not enter
the first and the second, there are no players↓=
47. [// MV2 goes back from the showcase towards the centre of the hall
48. **MV2:** =what=what↑
49. **THE VA:** There are no PLAYERS=
50. **MV2:** =aa=
51. [// MV2 goes towards the exit
52. [**THE VA:** =Here [five cabins are available °please°=
53. [//The Visitor Assistant points with her hand towards the
cabins
54. **MV3:** =And it is not allowed to enter the first and the second?
55. **THE VA:** Mgmha.

Excerpt 3.

In Excerpt 3, MV2 appears confused and scared as he asks, explicitly, a question about health: “And do people feel healthy after?” (34) Not satisfied with the Visitor

Assistant nodding her head, he wants to know about their first-hand experience. Unbeknown to MV2, however, the Visitor Assistant has not yet participated in the installation. What is important here is the uncertainty inherent to the practices. FV1, for instance, clarifies what to do by asking precise and detailed question with regards to the pills and cabins: “=[() and you need [just opposite to each↑]” (43). Again, the Visitor Assistant restates the written instructions, but now also includes additional information about the technical problems with the first and the second cabins: “well take one (.) any of them (.) choose a cabin (.) only do not enter the first and the second, there are no players↓=” (46). After this clarification and reiteration, the visitors are still confused but are more inclined to take a pill. It is worth noting that here neither of the visitors read the artist’s and curator’s explication. At the moment they treat the sound installation as if it is completely detached from the meaning it had in the curator’s and the artist’s view. The curatorial and artistic meanings are not relevant for their actions and experience.

The next excerpt, Excerpt 4, illustrates the reiteration of the instruction once again. The Visitor Assistant’s expertise is enacted while the expertise of one of the visitors (MV3) is dismissed.

63. **FV1:** I need to go to the fourth, don’t I?
 64. **MV3:** Yes.
 65. (2.0)
 66. [// FV1 makes few steps and approaches the Visitor Assistant, who is reading a book
 67. [// MV2 drinks water
 68. **[FV1:** And if I take the fourth pill, I need to go to the fourth cabin?
 69. **[THE VA:** Ughma.
 70. [// She doesn’t raise her head to look at FV1

Excerpt 4.

Once again, rather than explaining the meaning of these pills (by discussing the theoretical or conceptual meaning of the artwork), the Visitor Assistant suggests that the visitors follow the posted instructions while acting as if everything was natural and self-explanatory in the installation. Her reaction only confirms the visitors’ confusion because the situation, as well as the meaning of the actions required for the visitors to perform, remained unclear. The strategy that the visitors choose is to split the instructions into a set of micro-events before recognizing each of these micro-events in response to the Visitor Assistant’s comments. To reduce the risk the visitors clarify each general step and specify it with regard to their actions performed there. Thus FV1 asks not about the general instructions but about her own actions, expecting that the recognition of her specific actions by an ‘expert’ in that setting will reduce her uncertainty. The Visitor Assistant is an active mediation device who deals with this confusion. She mediates the universal rules and formal instruction into specific and situated practices which are embodied and experienced rather than justified rationally and explained conceptually. Her mediation restores social order at its most micro-level. Therefore, the first conclusion we can draw from these events is that visitors use a specific form of communication with the Visitor Assistant in order to deal with a risk experience. However, this conclusion is far from learning how the installation is technically designed (e.g., whether there is something in the pills), but it is a consecutive splitting of the action into “micro-actions” which are expected to be recognized separately. While the abstract action (“what to do?”) is not recognized

and cannot be approved, these sets of “sub-actions” are easily approved by the Visitor Assistant. This is the first direction of mediation.

I will now turn to the audience experiences of this form of communication. Focusing on instances when visitors try to understand what has happened, I will argue that the recognition of action which is required from the expert is transformed into *self-recognition*. The visitors want to know whether their experience is expected or if something went wrong and they are misunderstanding the installation. In this case, other visitors and the Visitor Assistant help by sharing their experiences. However, the Visitor Assistant is still perceived as the most competent actor.

157. **[MV2:** =A what do people in general usually do?
158. [/MV3 looks at MV2
159. [/The Visitor Assistant raises her head and stops reading. Stares at MV2
160. [(3.0)
161. [[/ MV2 comes closer to the Visitor Assistant
162. **THE VA:** °They are doing nothing°=
163. **MV2:** =No, in general=
164. **MV3:** =laughing (.) crying?
165. (.)
166. // The Warden does her hair and cleans the glasses
167. **THE VA:** Oh God, they are doing nothing=
168. **FV1:** =just empty=
169. **THE VA:** =They li[sten, and that is all↓=
170. // [The Visitor Assistant shrugs her shoulders
171. **MV2:** =No. I should hear something, right↑
172. **THE VA:** So what↑ haven't you heard anything?=
173. **MV2:** =I've heard sounds↓ which are there
uuuuooooiiii.. and...=
174. **THE VA:** =That is all, you should hear↓=
175. **MV2:** =And without a pill?
176. **THE VA:** =Inside each cabin↓
177. // The Visitor Assistant points
each cabin with her hand
178. **MV2:** And without a pill? (.) without a pill can I hear?=
179. **THE VA:** [=You could.=
180. // [=The Visitor Assistant turns her eyes and looks at her papers and takes and
throws her pencil
181. **MV2:** [=That is just [unclear] a trickery?
182. // [MV2 comes closer to the table
183. (.)
184. **THE VA:** I don't know... (how to explain) Why trickery↑ (.) <Just either with
or without a pill↓ similar [experience] you have↓>
185. (.)
186. **MV2:** It's a placebo effect ↓ yeah↑
187. **THE VA:** (.)°self-suggestion°()

Excerpt 5.

In Excerpt 5, the initial question of MV2 is “=A what do people in general usually do?” (157), which refers to the experiences of other visitors. In this case, the risk is reduced and the situation is clarified before a new form of curiosity appears. Visitors now try to unpack the relationship between the pill and the experience of sounds, referring to the meaning of the artwork rather than to their personal security and safety issues. ‘Trying to compare their reaction (or absence of reaction) with the reaction of others’ enables them to recognize whether or not their actions fit with the artworks intentions and the artists expectations.

After the Visitor Assistant says: “Oh God, they are doing nothing=” (167) and “=They li[sten, and that is all↓=” (169), MV2 insists that he should hear something specific “=No. I should hear something, right↑” (171) The next question confuses MV2 even more: “So what↑ haven’t you heard anything?=” (172), but later after sharing his experience he was told by the Visitor Assistant “=That is all, you should hear↓=” (174). This conversation reveals that there is no difference between the pills and that they contain nothing, and obviously the intended experience of the exhibition depends on the placebo effect and the power of self-suggestion (186-187). While dealing with risk earlier in Excerpts 1-4, the mediation process was seen to move from abstract rules and instructions to specific and detailed situated actions. Here, the situation is opposite, as the spectators now consider more abstract and shared experiences. What we have seen in the last excerpt is that for the latter mediation a different competence of the Visitor Assistant was required. Lacking this competence, the Visitor Assistant simply downgrades the experience to the absence of the effects. That is why, I argue, this particular installation is very illustrative of more general audience interactions. The role of visitor assistants in performing expertise and competency is crucial with regards to contemporary art; contemporary artists intentionally challenge our everyday practices and natural assumptions, and visitors often require assistance. Visitor experiences, therefore, depend significantly on the competencies of a visitor assistant.

The Visitor Assistant says that usually visitors do *nothing*, but *nothing* according to my observations means that they do a lot of micro-work and engage in many actions in order to restore social order in the situation. Recognition here is the most foundational element of communication, it clarifies the situation, making it safe for participants and converting their actions from universal rule and instruction (which are always incomplete and unrecognizable) into very specific and situated practices. Yet, in order to make aesthetic sense of an installation, self-recognition of the universal rules is necessary to achieve meaningful experiences. Here, the Visitor Assistant converts the specific and detailed experiences of the particular visitor into the general and universal experience of the installation.

CONCLUSION: THE VISIBILITY OF PERCEPTION

The main theoretical concept which this article aims to clarify is art perception. Throughout history of sociology of art, the idea of perception has been replaced by theories of cultural consumption and conceptualized by reference to external social forces that shape the outcome of artistic encounters. These studies have focused on taste preferences as illustrative of the social nature of art experience, while treating visitors’ behaviour as sociologically irrelevant. On the contrary, I have explored perception in its grounded and lived context, without reducing it to consumption vocabularies and external social forces. Here, perception is a situated activity and

practice. If it is studied as practice, one needs to focus on the details of the interaction with art objects and other actors which takes place in exhibition settings.

Drawing from observations of visitor conduct at art exhibitions, this article has endeavored to analyze the visible aspects of the practical work performed during the audience-making process at the *PharmaConcert* art installation. It has been argued that the sociology of art perception is concerned with the decoding metaphor while contemporary art installations, by their nature (like musical performances), operate in a different mode. In order to study this mode, I employed recent innovations from the sociology of art, namely the sociology of mediations. I showed theoretically and empirically how experiences of art mediate a particular form of social being, which is recognized and shared by the visitors. Empirical findings demonstrate that the mediation process is directed in two ways. The initial confusion and puzzle of perception is mediated through the splitting of abstract instructions into tiny, simple, recognizable actions, and the later aesthetic meaning emerges from a re-assembly of self-recognition and the act of sharing experiences with others. The audience of contemporary art installations takes the form of this specific communication pattern.

The empirical data discussed here illustrate the key argument that audiences are not mere social groups but, rather, are forms of communication that emerge as a result of artistic encounters. The sociology of art perception has traditionally been interested in the various external factors that impact art experience, while dismissing the communicative processes that enact situated identities and relations between artworks, visitors, and assistants. Considering audiences in this latter way gives sociology an opportunity to shift its research focus from how social structure shapes art experience, to how visitors enact social relations via communication.

The analysis I have provided is a specific contribution to the common idea that art is a collective action (Becker, 1984). While Becker's argument has gained classical status within the sociology of art, it has been rarely applied literally to the way art is experienced. A number of reasons can be mentioned for this, and in this paper I draw attention to only one of them. It is a preoccupation of the sociology of art to focus on 'traditional' forms of art, especially painting. Nowadays philosophers and theoreticians of art consider these forms as commodified (Groys, 2009), and thus art has lost its social and critical significance in shaping society. Art installations, on the contrary, are viewed as a non-commodifiable genre of contemporary art. They are made not to be sold, but experienced (Groys, 2009). Art installations construct a community "as oppositional response to the spectacle's atomization of social relations" (Bishop, 2011). It is precisely for these reasons, I have argued, that contemporary installation art is perhaps the most 'sociological' of all art genres.

I would like to conclude with the question of whether we can broaden the framework set out here for understanding and exploring audience-making with other art forms. Could this analysis of art installations be applied to painting, for example? What are the limitations and the possible results of introducing this framework into painting? What forms of sociality do painting and other consecrated genres bring into being? As I have argued here, experiences of an art installation are specific and situated, but ultimately the meaning one derives from this experience is always a shared experience, requiring the identification of one with the experiences of others. It makes experiences of installation art particularly interesting for sociology. Similarly, painting affords ways of perception which are social as well. It also means that in perceiving painting people also follow other activities in order to achieve social order

and bring meanings to their ways of looking. Perhaps by studying artistic mediations in different spaces, we can identify these visible forms of perception and draw some generalizing lessons for sociology.

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